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## Boxing, Bourdieu and Butler: Repetitions of change

The authors of this paper engage in academic sparring. Sparring is a process, a training, and a dialogue. This paper brings into dialogue the boxing bodies and autoethnographic experiences of the authors alongside the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler. By applying a feminist reading to Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus, the authors explore how the repetitive nature of boxing training can promote change. The paper considers boxing training as a transcendental identity project where individual labour is invested in order to affect change in symbolic capital. The repetitive nature of training leads to a habitus split, or *habitus clivé*. This split causes the boxer to renegotiate concepts of self as they engage with their own and other socially qualified and gendered bodies. This split exposes the freedoms and limitations of identity work as the boxers develop new habitus with and through their bodies (*hexis*). The authors argue that a reading of the performance of boxing bodies demonstrates the complex relationship between change, freedom, and restriction. Boxing is a physical culture supported by pervasive, hegemonic narratives which focus on the demonstration and development of respect and discipline. This paper explores the extent to which the repetitive nature of boxing training can be considered transgressive or resistant.

Keywords: Boxing; Ethnography; Bourdieu; Butler; Feminism; Habitus; Gender; Repetition

### Repetitions of Change

This paper places the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler in dialogue in order to explore the role of repetition within boxing training. Building upon the work of Broderick Chow (2015) and Jerri Daboo (2015) respectively, this paper focuses on the paradoxical nature of repetition. It argues that repetition is a way both to form and change habitual patterns; through repetition one comes to know and study the self and one is able to forget the self. Moya Lloyd (1999) argues, it 'is not in a single act of constitution or invention that the subject is brought into being, but through re-citation and repetition' (Lloyd 1999, 197). If performance can be understood as a 'constant state of again-ness', this paper examines what is re-cited and brought into being *again* through the repetitive acts of boxing training (Taylor 2016, 26). The study examines the authors' autoethnographic engagement with boxing. Scholarship on boxing is dominated by male voices writing about male experiences. This paper interrogates and

contests male-orientated readings of the sport as a vehicle through which patriarchal violent masculinity is enacted through the repetitive practices of training.

The lived experience of boxing training oftentimes differs vastly to academic and popular representations of the sport. Scholarship has read the boxing gym as a preserve of masculinity (Clymer 2004, Matthews 2016). Here, women are excluded and particular identities are (re)enacted and brought into being through the repetitive actions of training. Christopher Matthews argues that through the ‘monotonous repetition’ of boxing training, men enact movements that symbolically align them with the “manly art” and with it ‘a potentially violent and aggressive narrative of manhood’ (Matthews 2016, 325). For Loïc Wacquant, the gym and the repetitive practices offered there provide ‘an island of stability and order where social relations forbidden on the outside become once again possible’ (Wacquant 199, 229). Therefore, the ‘hypermasculine ethos’ that underpins the sport is argued to bring into being, through the embodied repetitions of its participants, relatively stable and violent performances of patriarchal masculinity (Wacquant 1995, 496). For whom the repetitive actions of boxing training facilitates the formation of particular *stable* identities requires greater interrogation.

Identity is narratively constructed (Smith and Sparkes 2008, 5). The narratives that support how identity is constructed within boxing can be understood through three major narrative tropes. These tropes include narratives about transformation (Wacquant 2005, Shepard 2005, Woodward 2014), salvation (Wacquant 1992, Sugden 1996, Satterlund 2006), and the exploitation of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Sugden 1996, Wacquant 2002). The extent to which violent masculine behaviour is controlled or exerted informs how transformation, salvation, and exploitation might be realised and understood. Too often, these readings do not adequately take into account the experience of women within the sport. Suffice to say that in popular discourse, the

minimal attention paid to the female experience of boxing has either sought to position particular female boxers within existing male-orientated narratives, or it neglects the contributions of individual female boxers to the sport altogether, reaffirming instead the all too familiar controversy and frenzy incited in the public domain. Women's boxing, as Malissa Smith (2014) suggests, has a rich and important history of its own. But there is clearly scope for more academic literature on women's boxing.

The presence and increasing popularity of women's boxing troubles many of the narratives associated with the sport of boxing. For Katherine Dunn, women's entry into the sport ignores 'Hollywood clichés [that boxing] is the last male bastion, that the only justification for its danger and brutality is as a harrowing escape route from poverty' (Dunn 2009, 20). Identity is not stable or uniform, it is 'a diverse, mobile, even unstable construction' incorporating 'variety and fragmentation' (Beynon 2002, 2). By bringing together the gendered discursive embodied boxing experiences of the authors, this paper challenges the notion that repetition leads to the (re)enactment of a uniform masculinity or femininity. Repetition in boxing leads to a (re)negotiation of gendered identity that requires greater critical analysis. Boxing is not the only site or practice that facilitates this (re)negotiation, but due to the polarisation of how boxing bodies are postured, and the limited, binary readings of the sport, we argue that boxing is a practice where the complexities and fragmented nature of gender identity are at risk of being overlooked or ignored.

The ethnographic projects conducted by the two authors draw into stark contrast the lived experience of boxing and the public and scholarly readings of the sport. By bringing together critical reflections on the authors' engagement with boxing training, this is the first substantial piece of work to place the lived experience of female and male boxers in dialogue with one another. At the heart of this paper are two

autoethnographic vignettes. These vignettes are presented as pieces of creative non-fiction. The first vignette is written by Solomon the second by Sarah. Inspired by the approach adopted by ethnographers, Mingé and Zimmerman (2013), this paper presents a dialogically reflexive approach to the analysis of praxis. The authors of this paper analyse one another's vignettes in order to expose those areas of their practice and their biases that might otherwise remain unquestioned and unexamined in their solitary work. This approach is presented as akin to academic sparring. If a competitive boxing bout can be characterised through the pursuit of dominance or conquest, boxing sparring is a process, a training, and a dialogue. This is a dialogic methodology applied to an analysis of boxing which is a dialogical sport. This paper is the outcome of months of more discrete and messy 'sparring' and 'training sessions' between the two authors as they formulate, position, critique, and reflect upon their own subjective gendered positions. The paper is the result of an ongoing moving conversation, which for the moment at least, is presented as a moment between rounds, the pause, the break, not the end of the bout. Good sparring partners expose one another's weaknesses. The repeated strikes bring awareness to areas otherwise left undefended or ignored. Sparring turns the chinks in one's armour into strengths. Mingé and Zimmerman describe their analytical process as 'unique in its vulnerability, trust, and honor'; their words are equally well suited to a description of sparring (Mingé and Zimmerman 2013, 14).

Through the enforced repetition and citation of social performance, the future is rehearsed into being. As Erini Kartsaki and Theron Schmidt observe in their editorial to *Performance Research: On Repetition*, the attempt to go back, to repeat, marks 'both the impossibility of return, but also the potential of remains' (Kartsaki & Schmidt 2015, 1). To repeat then is not to reproduce, or at least not to reproduce exactly. Whilst repetition is citational, repetition invites slippage between the impossibility of return,

the potential of remains, and the new modes of performing and being. Repetition is unstable (see Carlson 2004, 189). To think of repetition in terms of Bourdieu's notion of habitus, and Butler's concepts of performativity, is to invite enquiry into the way in which repetition resists or reproduces socially qualified norms.

For Chow (2015), physical culture deals with fleshy bodies, bodies in process that contest and negotiate meanings. To engage with physical culture is to engage with the demands of repetition. As Chow states, whilst repetition can harden bodies and inscribe ideology upon the muscles and sinew, it is also capable of the opposite, 'revealing the incomplete inscription of ideology upon the site of the body by demonstrating how [the socially qualified body] made flesh must be continually remade' (Chow 2015, 31). Similarly, Daboo (2015) demonstrates how the process of learning body-based somatic practices, through the act of repetition, leads to an understanding and embodying of 'impermanence, change and a transformation of the bodymind' (Daboo 2015, 12). In the vignettes presented by Solomon and Sarah, it is through the repetitive acts of boxing training that both individuals contest the socially qualified meanings associated with their bodies. These bodies are in conflict with ideas, developing new somaesthetic schemas that cause a split habitus. Within these splits, these bodies in process (re)negotiate meaning. They come to know themselves and shake off, pour out, or shed themselves. They experience a freedom but are not free from their socio-political histories, their past experiences, and their socially qualified gendered bodies. As Daboo articulates:

This is the paradox of repetition, as well as the paradox of performance, and it is also the paradox of us: we are repeating the same performance of ourselves, our repeated restored behaviour, in each moment, and yet we are different in each moment, as well as being not-another. Each moment is different, and yet it only

exists in the way it does because of the repeated actions and thoughts that have created and conditioned it. (Daboo 2015, 21)

When we engage in physical culture, we engage in practices of repetition. We perform by referencing that which has come before, that which conditions and creates our habitual performance repertoire. But our performances are never the same, they are always in process, always new, always bodying forth a being made anew. Our repetitive acts therefore are performative. In the vignettes presented below, these performative activities can be understood as forms of critical feminist practice as they identify strategies of subversive repetition. These strategies of subversive repetition offer the potential for transformation as they demonstrate bodies in dialogue with and contesting ideologies and gender norms.

### ***Wearing Site***

In a repetitive pattern, my bodily limits are exceeded. Boundaries are permeated, elements expelled, adopted and held secure by the architecture of the space. The boxing gym is as permeable as the bodies of my participants. I pour into the space. I splatter and spurt onto my training partners. With my gloved fist, I wipe myself out of my eyes, before driving myself into the flesh of my participants. My bodily boundaries are fluid. I soak into the architecture. I am liquid dripping into the once dusty wooden floorboards. I am vapour condensing on the steel girders. Elementally, I add to a remembered presence, a mixing of boxing bodies, coating the interior of the space. I feed the space my nutrients. My presence adds to the rhythm of the space. The mirrors are caked in a mixture of old dry sweat and new perspiration - the mist of repetition. The old elements of self that coat this space are not mine. This is not my gym, but it wears the imprint of my intrusion; a soggy, slippery coat made up of multiple selves.

Worn down by the practices facilitated in this space, exhausted empty elements of selves wear the gym.

This coating, claiming, and constructing of space is repetitive. It is a nightly ritual, revisited numerous times before my arrival. It is pattern that will be restored and (re)performed long after I leave. It is a performance that is precarious but bound. Within the space, my performance is bound. My actions are governed by a four-minute clock and my trainer. My trainer and time: overseers, pugilistic conductors. Three-minutes of work followed by one minute of rest. I work until the clock hits minute three and the trainer yells “TIME!” I am taped into my gloves, losing some of my freedom and dexterity; my gloved hands paw awkwardly at my water bottle. The head guard is pulled tight around my head; the cheek pads restrict my line of sight. I stand beside the ring apron with the other boxers from *my* gym. Our mouth guards shield our chattering teeth from view. We bounce back and forth on our toes, trying to shake out our jellified limbs. We have been brought to this gym to spar. We have no idea who our opponents are, or how many foes we will face. There is no agreement over the number of rounds we will perform. We are done when our trainer tells us we are done. This is not our gym. This does not feel comfortable, but it is familiar.

A crucifix is to the church what a picture of Muhammad Ali is to a boxing gym: something that adorns the walls; something that signifies the purpose of this space; something to be worshiped and revered. The picture of Ali in this gym is the same as the picture of Ali in *my* gym. Ali stands victorious over a fallen Liston, Ali’s right arm raised across his chest. In *my* gym, this image is comforting. Here, it is threatening. Here I identify with the fallen. Here I am the lamb to the slaughter. Here there is the potential to be crucified. In the ring, I am sluggish. I am on the back foot. I press into elastic ropes and lean out into the space. But what the ring giveth, the ring taketh away



and I am thrown back towards my opponent. Blessed be the name of Ali. Within the gym I am formed, forged and made anew. The effort expelled through my exertion seeps into a seemingly stable structure. A chemical reaction. The structure and I dance, tangle and embrace. In the clinch we form iron oxide ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ). I lose track of time. I try to count the number of rounds. I try to track my progress. Did I do more or less than I have done before? Am I improving? It is no good trying to think this through. I am encased in a fog of action. Responding to the body in front of me. Responding to the bodies around me. Responding to the calls from the trainer. 'That's you done big fella.' Soaked in a mixture of sweat and blood, my own and that of my partners', my exhausted frame squelches as it shakily slides out of the ring.

I leave the gym exhausted, battered, bruised, drained and dry. Long after I leave, parts of my body remain. These parts of me join the ghosts of workouts past. These ghosts hang out in the rafters, form scuff marks on canvas, condense and crystallise on cracked mirrors. I remain, albeit differently. I am as much a part of the architecture as the bricks and mortar of the gym. Long after I leave, long after the ruby-purple glow on my swollen face has changed colour and faded, long after the brutality of my fieldwork has softened on my body, I still remain. The more I train the more the space, my participants, and I mix; boxing bodies, architectures shaping and being shaped. We change. We become fluid. We harden. We rust.

### ***Bodies in conflict with ideas***

*Wearing Site* captures the visceral sense of tension between freedom and restraint in the boxing gym – how for the boxer, simple tasks like drinking water become burdensome without the assistance of someone else. Liberated, free-flowing movements are tested here as the materials designed to protect the body can actually inhibit physical expression, encroaching on one's sense of embodied freedom.

Typically, the boxer is imagined as hard, solid, machine-like, his body taught, built to absorb and counter oncoming blows and trained to avoid or deflect external force. Though this is captured partially in Solomon's vignette, the closing statement in particular, 'We change. We become fluid. We harden. We rust', reinforces the fluid, rather than fixed, nature of the boxing body. A statement that indicates a process, hinting towards the possibility of repetition and perhaps even repetitive change. Boxing bodies, Solomon tells us, are not mechanical, unthinking, or lacking agency, rather they are bodies in dialogue with the architecture, environment and other bodies they encounter. Solomon's body is in flux, processing the repetitive yet seemingly unpredictable series of actions and encounters that prompt him. His body moves, adapts and changes. As with any two-way exchange, the boxer has to – and is – to some extent – forced to remain open, which is also true of how identity is experienced in public life. Just as boxers move, slip and realign themselves in relation to their training partner or opponent in the ring, as individuals we engage in a similar process of orientation within social environments and protocols. A process of rubbing up against situations and encounters that test individuality, identity and personal freedom.

Boxing provides a helpful metaphor for thinking about how individuals consciously and unconsciously adjust their performances of self when confronted by external regulatory measures of public behaviour, otherwise referred to by Judith Butler as 'norms' (Butler 2006, viii). Social interactions are threaded with already prescribed codes and expectations (gender, race, sexuality) for presenting one's identity wherein 'regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity' (Butler 2006, 23). For Butler, though, confronting, or being confronted, by such predetermined expectations also brings about the potential to submit to, counteract or subvert these assumptions. Though Butler warns that this form of liberation is not

without its own limitations because ‘subversiveness, in terms of gender performativity, is not something that can be gauged or calculated’ (1992, 84) that does not mean to say that the social conventions that mark bodies and identities, cannot be resisted, stretched or explored. There is space for critical agency within the sites where individuals and social restrictions meet, whereby the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1988, 519) that configure our gendered selves also allows for re-configuration and re-invention of the rule. This does not mean that the rules and regulations of social protocol are relinquished altogether but there is certainly potential, in Butler’s terms, to call these rules into question. Awareness of this agency may not be transformative in the sense of enabling individuals to create change permanently, but the very practice of the calling into question these rules does itself destabilise the fixed, regulatory sense of social norms<sup>1</sup>, if only momentarily.

Agency, in boxing is realised via the bodily interplay between doing and being, which is why Woodward (2015) reinforce how ‘Bodies in boxing are not just enacted, they are enfleshed and material’ (2015, 94). Boxers may follow set movements, embody established sequences and learn how to move, think and perform like a boxer, but as we see in Solomon’s grapple between being himself and doing what is expected of him, there is also space to reinterpret and negotiate self. Solomon carries out the tasks

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<sup>1</sup> I am conscious here that more recent studies in gender and sexualities, particularly queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam who builds on Butler’s work, have enriched and expanded the discourse on how normative behaviours come to be and are potentially subverted. Such studies draw attention to how prevailing hetero and homonormative discourses regulate and assert to manage behaviours and bodies. Explorations of gender identity and sexualities have progressed the discussion on what constitutes ‘normative’ bodies and behaviours beyond the disciplinary binaries of male/female, gay/straight, black/white, and so on. The remit of this paper does not allow for a more substantial analysis of these works. However, it is noteworthy that the conversations have explored in detail what I refer to here as ‘normative and disciplinary codes of everyday life’, in relation to the lived experiences of varying gender identities and sexualities. For further reference see Halberstam (1998, 2005, 2011 and 2018).

expected of him in order to embody and perform physical power; he restricts the need to break away from boxing training, keeps his uncertainties and concerns circuiting only in his own body and mind, and ensures that these discomforts and anxieties go undetected.

The internal battle that Solomon describes highlights his struggle to contain what we assume must not spill out in the physically taxing demands of training, sparring and combat: hesitation, unease or insecurity. Here Solomon's thought process confirms many of the received expectations of masculine subjectivity; he is actively keeping any signs of discomfort at bay, keeping in line with the discipline and focus that boxing demands. Physical excretions might occur in the *Wearing Site* as the body expands and leaks into its environment. But if boxing involves performing archetypal forms of masculinity, Solomon must also fight to contain a plethora of emotional impulses. For Solomon the body *wears* and tires in training - physical and mental limitations are stretched and endured as he weaves between thinking and being. His body penetrated by recurring literal and figurative blows. He grafts alongside other bodies in the gym, leaning into, or sometimes on, other bodies for propping up when exhausted, 'driving' one's flesh into others during combat. Solomon's body expands beyond the boundaries of his flesh. He describes a process of becoming one with the space and the other bodies he is working alongside, leaving traces that remain not only in the environment he has been working in but also traces that linger with the bodies he encounters. These traces ensure that the gloves, pads, boxing bags and other bodies are just as much a part of the boxer as the ring is a part of the gym, both in the form of the lasting imprints on the materials that he and his combative collaborators utilise during training, and in the physical marks left on the flesh of his opponents. Solomon's account of training reinforces the imbedded and embodied restrictions imposed on performances of self in the boxing gym, but it also highlights possibilities for subverting these constraints, even

if these relations remain internal and reflective rather than manifesting publicly. As the boxer permeates blood, sweat and tears so the stable, fixed sense of physical self begins to dissolve.

The site that Solomon describes, which is one that is typically associated with action and aggression, emerges in practice, as somewhere thoughtful, reflexive, and porous to the extent of inviting a variety of bodily exchanges. Here Solomon's working with the environment he inhabits is palpable - he is reactive and responsive to the drills and instructions bellowed by the watchful trainer, and he is energetic in engaging with the bodies, practices, and materials that he meets. Instead of citing the predictable performances of masculinity that we come to expect of male behaviour in the boxing gym, whereby male bodies, punch and strike in order to assert dominance and aggression, Solomon describes how his body remains open, sensitive and vulnerable.

Laced throughout the vignette are elements that physically constrain the body and remind us that boxing practices are at times restrictive and imposing. The leather gloves that encase Solomon's 'paw' prevent him from taking water easily, the vigilant eye in the corner oversees the labouring bodies, and the running stopwatch is used to interrupt and coordinate Solomon's movements. Each of these references reaffirm the everyday social restrictions that boxing bodies encounter both inside and possibly even outside of the gym. Contra to the flexible, fluid and confident nature of the boxer who might *float like a butterfly and sting like a bee*, in Solomon's account the boxers are only 'done when 'the trainer tells' them they are done. Solomon sometimes lacks confidence, loses track of time, second-guessing himself in attempts to track his progress: 'Did I do more or less tonight than the night before? Am I improving? It is no good trying to think this through. I am encased in a fog of action'.

The vignette captures just a few of the multiple paradoxes in boxing – the contradiction between autonomy and control, which bounces back and forth as the boxer does on his feet - and the interplay between the boxer's tunnel focus on physical action (the public performance of the boxer) and the intrusive thoughts that are not productive or encouraging for training (the boxer's inner battle). This makes visible the frustration and unease of a boxer distracted by the sometimes-detrimental process of thinking too much. These references make him *feel* overwhelmingly human - a living, breathing body tussling with physical uncertainty and grappling with inner anxiety, thereby causing us to ponder what might happen if his body is pushed even further. As I contemplate the cultural associations of boxing more broadly it is sometimes easy to overlook how complicated the practice, the art and spectacle is to understand. Whether watching, practicing or competing, boxing is typically characterised by the sheer unpredictability and excitement generated from the hit and don't get hit rule in the ring. Or in some cases the sport is reduced to what Woodward describes as 'The phenomenon of one-on-one combat, in which the prime and explicit purpose is to render one's opponent unconscious' (2014, 2) - a reading that is in danger of reducing the sport solely to the brutal and barbaric connotations that it is commonly associated with. Yes, one cannot ignore the fact that for some the sole motivation in competitive boxing bouts is to knock their opponent out, but as Solomon's training experiences attest to, there are a plethora of other tactics, objectives and forces at play in how individual boxers process when putting on their gloves and stepping into the ring. Solomon's account may predominantly deal with training and sparring rather than competitive fighting, but his reflection reinforces that understanding boxing requires work; we must engage in and untangle the sort of knotty internal and external narratives that emerge in the physical and psychological labour described above. Solomon gives rise to the contradictory

nature of what it feels like to encounter and participate in the exchanges in boxing – the abundance of energy, activity, testosterone and emotion pouring out of bodies and into the environment. He speaks of the sweat seeping into the gaps in the creaking wooden floor, working its way into the cracks in the leather accessories and reflecting on the other exhausted bodies that operate in the gym. He tells of the chinks the boxer's figurative armoury as he works to constrain the inner dialogue of doubt and physical inefficiency. Solomon also shows how boxing bodies are not always working in opposition, at times they work in unison, echoing each other's sounds, paces, and movements, labouring and performing in synchronicity. I recall these qualities in my own boxing practice, the overwhelming sense of physical freedom and restriction that I experience within my own body. But the freedom to move and encounter other bodies in shared spaces, is sharply jolted by inner hesitation or the alarming buzzer that gives voice to what we can only imagine as a man (the trainer) sat watching with his clock. This is a literal image in Solomon's vignette - 'My actions are governed by a four-minute clock and my trainer' - which makes manifest what Woodward (2014) describes as *tradition* in boxing, 'characterized by endurances and continuities, for example in its legends, body practices and regulations and in its associations with class-based hegemonic masculinity and with racialized, ethnicized social inclusions and exclusions' (2014, 2). An image, nevertheless, I feel I encounter far less in the boxing gym than I do in everyday life because boxing is a physical undoing and interrogation of fixed notions of masculinity and femininity. Through the repetitive performing and troubling social norms, boxing invites us to tussle with the sort of bodily and gendered practices that Butler sees as critical sites of agency. As Halberstam suggests in *Female Masculinity* (1998): 'Presumably, the disappearance of women's boxing in both England and

America by the turn of the century had everything to do with Victorian notions of womanhood and an emergent conception of middleclass masculinity' (1998, 272).

Solomon draws out the stark contrast between the images of the tough, harden, encased bodies in boxing that we are so used to seeing, and the fragile, penetrable – often all too clumsy - nature of boxing bodies that makes boxing such a contentious sport to watch and participate in. His descriptions of the boxing body rub against typical narratives of masculine identity, causing us to question what bodies occupy the sport of boxing and how they might *feel*. Does the tough, powerful exterior enact a performance of masking someone who is actually lacking in confidence and feeling fearful? Or can the boxer be both brave and courageous and experience nervousness and weakness simultaneously? The popular narratives of boxing will tell us no. But Solomon's lived experience of working through these physical restrictions allows us to glimpse a different version of the male-orientated boxing narrative. Professor of Engineering Deb Chachra (2018) argues that 'boxing isn't just about breaking gender norms or getting stronger as an individual – it's a subversion that reveals the moral bankruptcy at the heart of the entire system of patriarchal power' - a power that tells us how men and women should be and behave and what spaces they can and should occupy (Chachra 2018, 128).

Drawing out the physical interplay of embodied binaries in boxing - resilience and vulnerability, fluidity and restriction, and a body that feels both porous and encased at the same time - offers one way of confronting the notion that boxing demands particular performances of masculinity expected of boxing legends. It takes gall to express the fragility of one's body in boxing, let alone to reveal feelings and ideas that arguably fail to meet the stereotypical machismo assumptions of boxing bodies that posture male boxers as quintessentially representative of aggression and dominance.



Susan Cahn (1994) tell us that sport more generally, ‘turns boys into men and endows them with the physical strength and confidence to assume positions of power’ (Cahn 1994, 279). But Solomon’s description of boxing troubles this narrative, in a similar way to how female boxers, in their physical expressions and performance, confront the notion that the qualities of masculinity - ‘skill, strength, speed, physical dominance, uninhibited use of space and motion’ – belong to men and men only (Ibid).

One binary that Solomon distinctly disrupts within his narrated experience of boxing, is the divide between mind and body that is commonly gendered. Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* tells us that ‘the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man is mind and woman body’, is deeply ingrained in Western philosophical thought (Grosz 1994, 4). However, knowledge and experience, in Solomon’s vignette are not driven by a cognitive process wherein information unfolds and is narrated via what he is *thinking*. Rather Solomon’s practice is visceral, embodied and becomes tangible to the reader via a very honest and detailed account of his body in process - a body that *feels* and is *feeling* - a body open to exchange and new encounters. Solomon narrates a body open to and aware of its encounters, a body prepared to leave behind remnants of self in the name of authentic exploration and exchange, not solely as an attempt to acquire knowledge or master practice. The traces that Solomon leaves behind, the parts of himself offered up for collaboration with other bodies and material, captures what boxing scholarship frequently overlooks. Boxing is built on community and progress is made by participating in the sort of spaces and relationships that Solomon describes. As in life there are times where the experience of training and navigating these relationships is fraught, volatile, and violent. But what Solomon captures are the more sensuous qualities of the sport - the feelings and experiences of

embodied practice that cannot be captured from observation. The sensations Solomon describes defy the cliché descriptions of hitting, punching, colliding and bleeding that we typically hear of from an observer's point of view. Instead he tells us of the spilling, absorbing self, and the shifting inner tensions that align us as readers with the boxer's body in combat. Solomon invites us into the sorts of messy, fleshy, complicated encounters in boxing that one can only know from corporal cognition and reflexive practice.

### ***Shadowboxing – preparation***

Breath

Bounce Shuffle Sway

Realign – align

Twist

Bounce shuffle sway

Twist

Jab

Jab

Bounce shuffle sway

Jab Jab Shuffle

Cross

Twist

Jab

Jab

Bounce shuffle sway

Jab Jab Shuffle

Cross

The movement starts

The sequence flows

The sensation – always surprising

Breath

Bounce Shuffle Sway

Jab. Jab cross

Jab cross hook

Roll

Twist

Realign align

Jab

Jab cross hook hook

Dip. Duck. Roll

Realign

Resist

Inhale

Exhale

Shake the grind of the day

Shed the ache of everyday posture

Sequence gestures, gather past events - pace, process and disregard.

Bounce. Shuffle. Sway

Jab. Cross. Slay.

Above I've tried to capture a snapshot of the sequence – or routine rather – that I experience each time I step into the gym (or my garden sometimes) and I begin shadowboxing. I process – coordinate in a way like in no other part of my life – I focus

– I capture – bodily and mentally – and release what’s no longer relevant. This process – these postures and these sensations make sense to me and I start to feel at home in my body and I feel freedom – typically for the first time that day – in my physical expression. As I fatigue I find comfort in the spaces and structures around me. I no longer acknowledge the discomfort or feel the hostility I’ve experienced in the harsher environments at work or at other points in the day. But make no mistake – this space is familiar – but it’s by no means comfortable in the conventional sense of the word. I find comfort here. Yes, I feel strength – like I’ve discovered a new-found confidence in my body and mind. But my heart races, I feel stretched, pushed to my limits – tested beyond my means. I think I might be sick. I attempt to conjure energy from every inch of my body, my arms tire – ‘I should work from the legs more, I think’; my legs tire, they burn and start to feel detached from my hips. My formally fast hands, quick, fluid combinations are slow and ineffective. The sound of my tiring, laboured breathing echoes in my head and my own resistance begins to grow. I’m tired – I want to stop now, I think, as my mind begins to take over and my body sags with relief at the sound of the buzzer. I pace and try to catch my breath; in the first 30 seconds rest I begin to forget the discomfort and unease of the last minute, I take a sip of water, I breath, I shuffle back and forth, twist my hips from side to side and pound my leather gloves together. I’m ready. Round two.

*Pad work:*

Reserved

Frustrated

Tense

Confused

Frustrated

Tense

Confused

Tense

Frustrated

Frustrated

Concerned

Process. Disengage. Disconnect. Reconnect. Realign.

Twist

Women should be.....

Twist

Women aren't ....

Twist

Why are you...?

Resist

Shouldn't you be....?

Twist

Afraid

Why are you so....?

Resist

Angry

Frustrated

Angry

EMOTIONAL

Calm down!

Process.

Move.

Jab.

Move

Disengage

Move.

Cross.

Move.

### ***Socially qualified bodies***

Within Sarah's vignette is a body in dialogue with symbolic power; a being *ducking, rolling, and frustrated* by properties and movements that are socially qualified and gendered. 'Women should be... [...] Women aren't .... [...] Why are you?' In response to these questions and the symbolic power informing how her gendered body *should* be experienced, Sarah has to 'realign' and 'align'. This process is revisited, causing Sarah to 'twist' and to 'resist'. This process is exhaustive and frustrating, leading to a disconnect that is only remedied once Sarah chooses to realign again. It is a process that incites tension, fear, and confusion. To be clear, it is not the process of boxing (in and of itself) that causes these sensations, but the female boxing body battling symbolic power and socially qualified practices of movement. This bodily practice, which invites Sarah to bounce, jab, cross, shuffle, and sway, in many respects resists Bourdieu's (1990) implicit definition of the fundamental virtue of conformity. Sarah engages in a bodily practice which makes her stand apart from others, as demonstrated by the questioning of the reception of her body schema, 'Shouldn't you be...? [...] Why are you so...?' Yet, Sarah's engagement with this schema is 'Reserved', governed by the need to realign and align - to conform. If in *Wearing Site*,

the response to exertion is a flooding of the space, a flowing forth from the porous bodies out onto the canvas and up into the atmosphere, the response in Sarah's vignette is different. Sarah's exerted body 'sags'. For Bourdieu, socially qualified actions that lead to modest, restrained, and reserved movements, orient 'the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside' (Bourdieu 1990, 70). Whilst there is an acknowledgement of this within Sarah's vignette, there are also ample moments of resistance to binary, limited, and over-deterministic readings of the performance and experience of the female body. Therefore, a feminist reading of Bourdieu's theories on habitus, capital, and field is useful in examining the examples of resistance, transformation and *habitus clivé* within Sarah's vignette.

Towards the end of Sarah's vignette, realignment and resistance are replaced by movement. The movement is away from self-critique and objectification and towards combat and engagement with other bodies. It is a movement with the potential to be upwards, outwards, and towards others. Within this process Sarah finds a freedom not necessarily felt in other parts of her life. But this freedom is not free-from those harsher environments that codify and qualify the types of engagements with the world expected and tolerated by gendered bodies. The presence of these other spaces and other narratives haunt Sarah's practice. Throughout the three sets of exercises Sarah's vignette signals a working through or shedding of a socially qualified body and social self. Sarah shakes 'the grind of the day' and sheds 'the ache of everyday posture'. Sarah's body enacts a muscle memory. This muscle memory incorporates the various social roles that are inhabited in her everyday life. These social roles create their own somaesthetic pathologies of everyday life, a habitus that orders and informs one's engagement with self and the world. The boxing exercises create a space for Sarah to confront and contest these pathologies and this muscle memory. The exercises provide

the opportunity for disconnection from and disengagement with a variety of habitual somaesthetics that Sarah finds limiting in her everyday life.

Sarah's ability to acknowledge, contest, and enact new or different forms of habitus problematises the 'durability of Bourdieu's dispositional subject' (Lovell 2000, 12). Sarah is able to (re)negotiate her habitus, entering into a *habitus clivé*, through the performance and performative acts of her body. Sarah's *habitus clivé* is achieved through repetition. A *habitus clivé* is a "split habitus", where an individual's habitus is "divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences" (Bourdieu in Thorpe 2009, 503). Boxing brings into question what Sarah's body bears - her hexis. As Thorpe (2009) observes, '[f]or Bourdieu, habitus operates at the unconscious level unless individuals with a well-developed habitus find themselves moving across new, unfamiliar fields' (Thorpe 2009, 503). Sarah argues that the field of boxing *is* familiar, 'but it's by no means comfortable in the conventional sense of the word.' Sarah finds comfort through the way in which the familial practice disrupts her somaesthetic perception of self, as well as, through a *habitus clivé*. The negotiation of this split habitus leads to 'a new-found confidence in my body and mind.' Sarah negotiates her socially gendered body through the repetitive physical practices of boxing. This negotiation results in a narrative of resistance, realignment, and transformation.

Through repetitive acts, Sarah rehearses her identity into being. As Lovell states, this position celebrates 'flexible selves, permeable or semi-permeable boundaries, the journey traversed rather than origins or lasting determinations' (Lovell 2000, 14). Further, a postmodernist and poststructuralist discourse suggest that social actors are capable of '[t]he sloughing off of oppressive identities [...] through "queering the pitch"; destabilizing the fixities of social identity through paradoxical or ironic masquerades'



(Ibid). It is through boxing as a practice of (re)performance that Sarah finds space to subvert and undermine her socially qualified body. This engagement facilitates the experience of a split habitus, bringing into focus the permeable or semipermeable nature of her performance of gender. By queering the pitch, Sarah experiences agency and freedom. In experiencing freedom, but not being free-from, the everyday habitual somaesthetic practices of her social and gendered body, Sarah's vignette brings into focus the "synchronous nature of constraint and freedom" negotiated by women in contemporary physical culture (McNay in Thorpe 2009, 491). Sarah's engagement with physical culture challenges the social construction of her body, her gendered habitus. Challenging a reading of Bourdieu as overly deterministic, Toril Moi (1991) argues, that change is possible within Bourdieu's scheme of things, 'change is grounded in practice, in the objective conditions of everyday life' (Moi 1991, 1029). If habitus is produced through the repeated performance of socially codified movements, a split habitus occurs when an individual's performance practices disrupt the doxa. Sarah's engagement with the physical culture of boxing is a heterodox practice producing a personal crisis. This crisis makes possible a critique of the socially qualified body. The crisis brings into focus, and challenges, the narrative resources Sarah has at her disposal for what her gendered body *should* do.

Sarah's vignette engages with the narrative trope of transformation as she shakes off and sheds less desirable physical iterations of self. To this end, the vignette demonstrates in action that boxing is, as Wacquant argues (1995), 'a vehicle for a project of ontological transcendence' whereby the individuals who engage with it 'seek literally to fashion themselves into a new being' so as to escape the social determinations that bear upon them (Wacquant 1995, 501). Sarah's engagement with a

*habitus clivé* generates a somaesthetic (re)negotiation of self. It is here that the potential for change and transformation in the pursuit of capital can be witnessed.

The narratives of transformation, so central to readings of boxing, speak to the acquisition of capital. Dominant boxing narratives prioritise the acquisition of economic, symbolic, and corporeal capital. These cultural narratives of transformation often address the meteoric, almost miraculous change in one's relationship with capital. Sarah's vignette speaks to narratives of transformation. These narratives are in dialogue with socially conceived notions of gender norms. The snapshot provided by this vignette speaks of a substantial rather than meteoric transformation. Sarah's vignette addresses the transformation of self. Whilst shaking off and shedding the everyday self, Sarah engages with an internal critique of what a woman *should* and *should not* be, what a woman *should* and *should not* do. As Sarah transitions through the three distinct physical practices, there is a transformation in how she engages with self and space and how she narrates this engagement. The movement is through and away from a grounded, resistant body that needs to realign and align with socially qualified normative gendered expectations. The movement is outwards and towards others, towards combat.

Within Sarah's vignette, the narrative of transformation demonstrates a self capable of oscillation between different social, symbolic, and corporeal capital selves. Sarah's resistance, realignment, and alignment demonstrate an ongoing negotiation with her gendered habitus and importantly indicate that she is a capital-accumulating subject, not just a capital bearing object.

As McNay demonstrates, gender reflexivity arises from “the tensions inherent in the concrete negotiation of increasing conflictual female roles” (McNay in Thorpe 2009, 504). This form of gender reflexivity is linked to Bourdieu's concept of *regulated*

*liberties*. Thorpe defines Bourdieu's concept of regulated liberties as 'small exercises of power that arise in the context of the existing social order, but which resignify it in some way' (507). These practices arise from within the doxa, serving as a 'resistant efficacy', seeking to subvert hegemonies and resist hegemonic power (McKenzie 2001). The physical practices of boxing enable Sarah to negotiate the various socially qualified bodies and personas she inhabits in her everyday life. These resistant practices highlight, 'the various forms of power operating on and through women's [...] bodies' as they engage with physical culture (Olive and Thorpe 2011, 424). The repetition of these practices has heterodoxic qualities as [author's name] transcendental body project enables her to resist socially qualified gendered norms as a capital-accumulating subject. If this process is in play in boxing for Sarah, it is important to understand how other boxers experience their gendered bodies through repetitive practice. More work is required to understand how repetition is a form of resistant efficacy that challenges, subverts, and changes the doxa.

### ***The clinch***

In boxing, a clinch is a hold: a posture/action in which two fighters collide and engage one another, grappling at close quarters, sometimes leaning on or into one another to exert and assume physical dominance. But a clinch, in both sparring and in some competitive bouts, is also a moment to pause and possibly even rest as two bodies engage and slow down, creating a shared pace and often physically propping one another up. For us, this clinch is an opportunity to pause and come together to reflect on the tensions we have confronted individually, and jointly address the processes of tangling and untangling our thoughts, experiences and our bodies. Negotiation of self, as we have seen in our vignettes, comes about through boxing by engaging in a physical

process of grappling, processing, repeating and in some cases *rupturing* our familial selves and habitual embodied experiences.

The vignettes both address movement, change, and the presence of self in shared spaces. However, whilst they make visible the gendered performance of self within the sport of boxing, they are not equally self-aware or equally self-critical of this performance. Solomon's vignette implicitly addresses his performance of masculinity, but the narrative provided is not explicitly critically self-aware of his gendered performance. On the other hand, Sarah's vignette makes central the negotiation and awareness of her gendered body. In both examples, the boxing body can be read as fluid, in flux, and capable of change. The physical labour of boxing wears upon the bodies of its participants, transforming them. These bodies also wear, enact, and negotiate socially qualified gender norms. Boxing facilitates literal and figurative exchanges between the internal and external worlds of social actors. Butler's notion of performativity offers the potential for bodies to test and subvert assumed gendered identities; repetition with difference. This is key, because as Elizabeth Freeman's reading of Butler warns, 'Repetitions with any backward-looking force' are not only 'citational' but restrictive (Freeman 2010, 63). This repetitive restriction is ever more apparent in boxing if repetition and performance are thought of only in terms of the popular narratives that the boxing world and boxers as individuals typically abide by. In other words, if female boxing bodies and their performances are conceived, constructed and circulated only in relation to popular male-driven narratives that govern the sport, there is no space for critical agency or change. In fact, if all boxing bodies are understood to either repeat, cite or embody a limited, patriarchal and violent version of masculinity, there is a risk that boxing will continue to reinforce the same restrictions.

The vignettes demonstrate the extent to which boxing is a form of praxis for the authors. The vignettes trouble rigid and limited readings of gendered bodies. They show how through engagement with physical culture, bodies may be required to adopt new forms of habitus and acquire different types of capital. The experiences described by the authors indicate the transformative power of performance. It is possible to counter restrictive boxing narratives through a focus on strategies of subversive repetition. Dedicating further critical attention to the repetitive performance of boxing bodies, and the interplay between established narratives and the fleshy materiality of the sport, would be one way to create space for subversive readings of transformation within boxing.

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